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# Food preparation of the Guambianos, an indigenous tribe of Colombia

ANA MARGARITA DIMOCK\*

**ABSTRACT** — The Guambiano Indians are an indigenous tribe of Colombia. Numbering 8,000, their only location is on a reservation just outside the village of Silvia. They retain many unique cultural traits, but are very slowly becoming acculturated into modern Colombian society. Although more nourishing foods are available to them, the Guambianos have a very starchy diet, based upon their subsistence pattern.

The Guambiano Indians are an indigenous tribe located on a reservation just outside the town of Silvia in southwestern Colombia. They are one of the last un-aculturated tribes left in Colombia, retaining their unique costume and language. Although well-acquainted with the typical mestizo culture of the surrounding area, the Guambianos choose to remain apart as much as they can. These Indians are, with few exceptions, completely endogamous, and very few ever leave the reservation. About 8,000 live on this reservation that lies about 9,000 feet above sea level in the central cordillera of the Andean highlands. It is owned as a group, and a council of the Indians assigns plots for use according to need. There is no rotation of ownership.

Every day, except Saturdays and Sundays, the Guambianos work their fields. Women as well as men, and children who are old enough, work together in the fields. The Guambianos are subsistence farmers. Their whole livelihood depends upon potatoes, their main staple crop. In addition to three varieties of potatoes, they also raise four varieties of onions, including a mild garlic called 'aji', several types of corn, and a small amount of wheat. Virtually nothing else can be cultivated in this chilly, mountainous land that suffers from extreme erosion.

Some years ago Peace Corps volunteers introduced other crops like carrots and squash to the area. They were cultivated for a year or two but then abandoned. Almost all fields are on the mountain slopes, and they are not always terraced. In the higher regions of the reservation, known as the 'paramo' region, it is always cold and damp, and only the hardy potatoes can be grown there.

The Guambianos practice slash-and-burn agriculture. All of the cultivation is done by hand, no animals are used; modern iron foot plows, shovels, and machetes are the basic tools.

Every Guambiano house has at least one storage room for certain amounts of potatoes, onions, and corn. Since the only seasonal climate changes are between three rainy seasons and three dry, the Guambiano plant and harvest several times during the year, and thus do not have to store great amounts of food. They keep almost all of the corn, which is dried in the sun, and sell potatoes and onions in the open market in Silvia every Tuesday. A few Indians also sell

in other markets on other days of the week. With the money earned from selling of crops, the Guambianos buy the other foods and things they need.

Potatoes, onions, and corn also make up the bulk of the diet. The other important staples are coffee, rice, 'panela' (blocks of raw brown sugar), bread, bananas, 'platinos' (platines), 'manteca' (raw animal lard), and 'yuca' (sweet manioc), which are purchased in the market. The Guambianos rarely buy meat because they cannot afford to do so. Occasionally milk, eggs, salt, flour, 'canela' (cinnamon stick), and small red and orange hot peppers are bought.

## **Bland, starchy, limited diet**

Typically, Colombian food is very plain, bland, and starchy, with little protein; Guambiano food is even more so. It almost completely lacks the protein, fruits, and vegetables that can be found on the tables in nearby Silvia. The basic meal is a soup called 'sancocho', served with very sweet coffee and one or two bread rolls. Every Guambiano household makes sancocho with its own variation. Sancocho usually consists of water, manteca or soup bones, potatoes, onions, yuca, salt, and sometimes rice or corn. The bulk of the soup is the potatoes. The variations might consist of the addition of platinos, an egg, a type of lima bean, or perhaps some purchased noodles. Sancocho is served for the morning and evening meals. The mid-day meal consists of only coffee and bread rolls, prepared and eaten in the fields.

Usually one woman of the household will remain home during the day to prepare meals, look after the very young children and spin or weave. All cooking, eating, and almost all other activity takes place in the 'cocina' (kitchen) around the central hearth, filled with wood. Most often the fire is open, but occasionally a small stove is built over it. A series of ceramic blocks (called 'pingas') are placed in and around the fire to balance the several kettles and pots on the fire. Also, a heavy, stiff wire will hang from the roof beam directly over the fire and a kettle may hang from this. There are several different lengths and forms of wire to adjust the position of the kettle over the fire.

In preparing the sancocho, there is no real order of ingredients. If corn is used, it is ground in a food grinder; if there is no grinder, a mano and matate are used. Everything is sliced with a small straight hand knife and put in a large kettle of water and manteca, and set over the fire to cook.

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When it is done, the stew is ladled out with a large spoon into bowls, the men being served first. Everyone sits on little stools around the fire and eats; usually one always eats out of a bowl with a spoon. Plates, forks and knives are rarely used. A glass or small bowl of salt is passed around, and each helps himself; likewise with hot pepper sauce made from aji, hot peppers, and a little oil. Coffee and bread rolls are given after the soup is finished. The coffee is always sweetened with a lot of panela; it is made by dripping water boiled with panela into a wire-handled cloth sieve that holds the ground coffee. The bowls, mugs, and plates used are all anamaled metalware. The kettles and pots are modern tin or aluminum, which contrasts sharply with the ceramic ware that used to be used until recent years. After the meal is finished, the dishes are just rinsed with water and put away.

The Guambianos rarely buy meat in the market, but almost every household will have at least one cow, pig, lamb, or chicken. These would be slaughtered only for a special occasion or a holiday. Once in a while guinea pigs are eaten, and fish are caught in the river flowing through the reservation. If meat is bought in the market, it is usually the tripe, heart, liver, or soup bones. Other cuts of meat are most often hung from the roof over the fire to be smoked.

#### Frying as well as boiling

The Indians have a few other ways to preparing food, but not many. Generally, if something is not boiled in soup, it is fried in hot lard. Whole potatoes are sliced lengthwise and deep-fat fried in manteca. The same is true for bananas, platinos, and the occasional egg. The manteca is used many times over. A type of fried bread is made also. The women will measure out by hand amounts of flour, water, salt, and bicarbonate of soda and mix them by hand; then will form the dough into flat rounds and fry them. Sometimes rice or potatoes will be boiled along with some onion.

Two hot and very sweet beverages are very much enjoyed by the Guambianos. One is water boiled with panela, adding either canela or 'apio' (a type of celery leaf) for flavoring. The other is the same but with the addition of bitter chocolate that is whirled very fast with a wooden mixing utensil. If milk can be afforded, that too is boiled for drinking.

With the Guambianos, meals are generally a happy time when the entire family is together at home. Late in the evenings before going to bed, everyone enjoys a mug of hot panela or hot chocolate. Whenever anyone comes to visit, they are immediately set down by the fire and given a mug of coffee and some bread. On days of weddings or holy days, large feasts are prepared by many women, usually with the slaughtering of an animal. When a man needs to build a new house or plant a large field, he may hold a 'minga' which is a communal work party. Friends and relatives come to help, and in turn the man is obligated to throw a big feast with lots of music and dancing after.

The Guambianos have two alcoholic drinks of which they are quite fond. Most popular (with mestizos and Indians alike) is a brew called 'aguardiente'. It is a rum made from sugar cane and flavored strongly with anise. It is almost always drunk in large quantities with slices of lime. The other drink is 'chicha' — fermented masticated corn. There is also a popular commercial rum, but few Indians can afford it. Commercial aguardiente is usually inexpensive enough for the Guambianos, but many bootleg their own, using panela instead of the sugar cane. The chewing of coca leaves to relieve hunger pains and produce a euphoria is generally not practiced by the Guambianos. They feel it is degrading because it proves one is too poor to buy food.

Food preparation among the Guambianos is not an important aspect of their culture. A woman does not take pride in a particularly flavorful sancocho or a delicately fried banana. One eats to live. This is not a particularly strange notion, as there is little more interest in cooking among the mestizo women in the neighboring communities such as Silvia. But there is more variety in the foods and preparations there. In fact, these resources are available to the Guambianos but are not used by them. Some of this can be attributed to the point that for the most part, the Indians are poorer and cannot afford to buy the more expensive commodities. Or it may be another example of the Indians' refusal to acculturate into modern mestizo life. In any case, the restricted diet shows a marked physical difference in stature between the Guambiano and the Silvia mestizo. The Guambianos are shorter by several inches on the average. Opposite of what might be expected, they are thinner and very muscular. This difference is quite noticeable among the women, who do not stay home and cook all day like the mestizo women, but work in the fields. Because of the strenuous labor the Guambianos do not put on excess weight while eating such a starchy diet.

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